

Published: May 13, 2015, *Kokomo Tribune* [Page: A4]

http://www.kokomotribune.com/opinion/house_of_burgess/house-of-burgess-calling-genocide-by-its-right-name/article_f3318450-f8e5-11e4-8ca6-378da65a9a1d.html



KT photo | **Tim Bath**
Rob Burgess, Tribune night editor

House of Burgess: Calling genocide by its right name

100th anniversary of 1.5 million Armenians' murders

By Rob Burgess
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On Aug. 22, 1939, the Nazi invasion of Poland was still a week away. German Chancellor Adolph Hitler had convened his top Wehrmacht leaders at the Berghof, his home in the Bavarian Alps. The Führer wanted no confusion among his military commanders regarding the pending extermination of the Polish people.

"I have issued the command — and I'll have anybody who utters but one word of criticism executed by a firing squad — that our war aim does not

consist in reaching certain lines, but in the physical destruction of the enemy," read a translated transcript of Hitler's speech obtained by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Louis P. Lochner, first published in his 1942 book, "What About Germany?" "Accordingly, I have placed my death-head formation in readiness ... with orders to them to send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language. Only thus shall we gain the living space which we need."

The final line of this passage reveals the historical origin of the dictator's audacity.

"Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" he asked.

Who, indeed?

Last month marked the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, known to the Armenians as the "Great Crime" or the "Great Calamity." In what was then the Ottoman Empire and today is Turkey, around 1.5 million mostly Christian Armenians were murdered. These massacres and deportations were spearheaded by the right-wing Islamic group, the Committee of Union and Progress.

According to The American Heritage Dictionary, the word "genocide" is defined as: "The systematic, planned annihilation of a racial, political, or

cultural group.” By this standard, there is no other word to describe what happened to the Armenian people.

These facts are not up for debate. And, as compiled by the Armenian National Committee of America, then Sen. Barack Obama used to agree:

- “I write with regard to the State Department’s decision to recall [Armenian] Ambassador John Evans from his post ... after he used the term ‘genocide’ to describe the Turkish government’s slaughter of Armenians. ... [It] is not an ‘allegation,’ a ‘personal opinion,’ or a ‘point of view.’ Supported by an overwhelming amount of historical evidence, it is a widely documented fact.” – July 28, 2006 letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.
- “For those who aren’t aware, there was a genocide that did take place against the Armenian people. It is one of these situations where we have seen a constant denial on the part of the Turkish government and others that this occurred. It has become a sore spot diplomatically.” — April 12, 2007 weekly Washington, D.C., “breakfast briefing.”
- “As a senator, I strongly support passage of the Armenian Genocide Resolution, and as president I will recognize the Armenian Genocide.” — Jan. 19, 2008 presidential campaign statement.
- “It is imperative that we recognize the horrific acts carried out against the Armenian people as genocide and I will continue to stand with the Armenian

American community in calling for the government of Turkey to acknowledge it as such.” — April 28, 2008 U.S. Senate floor statement in remembrance of the Armenian Genocide.

- “Even in the face of genocide, the pain of the past has not defeated the Armenians, either in Armenia or the far-flung diaspora.” — Sept. 21, 2008 presidential campaign statement celebrating Armenian Independence Day.
- “Obama believes we must recognize this tragic reality and strongly supports a U.S.-Armenian relationship that advances our common security and strengthens Armenian democracy.” — Oct. 31, 2008 presidential campaign fact sheet.

And now that he's president? Crickets. Nothing. Time is running out for Obama to make good on this promise. This is about much more than resolving campaign hypocrisy with governing realities. Calling genocide by its right name is imperative. Like Hitler in 1939, the next tyrant looking to throw their very own holocaust will note well how we speak of those which have come before it.

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